

Parents worried about future school enrollment

By KENDRA JOHNSON
The Patriot Ledger

DUXBURY

DUXBURY — Despite a report that no new school facilities are needed, parents asked school officials last night to develop a plan to accommodate an increase in the student population.

In an annual report on space needs, school business manager Mickey McGonagle announced that enrollment projections do not show a need for a new school facility.

McGonagle quoted enrollment statistics last night during the annual presentation of the space utilization committee's findings.

The committee was formed three years ago to assess the space and facility needs of the schools. Members include school administrators,

Town Planner Thomas Broadrick and Deputy Assessor Richard Finnegan.

McGonagle said estimated increases in the school population are marginal partly because, as stated in the new comprehensive plan, it is increasingly more difficult for young families to find affordable housing in Duxbury.

But parents said they think families with young children are still buying homes in town and that the school population will continue to increase.

McGonagle said if actual enrollments in the future are slightly higher than projected, each school has two or three rooms that could be

changed to classrooms to accommodate the added students.

With a class size of 25, Chandler School has a capacity of 675, Alden School 500, the middle school 1,000 and the high school 1,250. Most of the grades have enrollments of 220 to 240 students.

"At this point in time, the numbers don't warrant new construction," McGonagle said.

But parents said class sizes are approaching the state guideline of 25 and asked the school committee to consider the increase in the number of students per class.

"I urge the school committee to take a stand and put some kind of schedule together to address this," parent Sarah Madigan said.

School committee members said

they want to hear from the developers of the new comprehensive plan at the planning board hearing Monday before making decisions about how to approach any significant increase in enrollment.

"I see down the road that we will be building another building," school committee member Linda Smith said. "I get as frustrated as you do with this process, but I've been at it long enough to know there is a process."

Assistant Superintendent John Kerrigan presented a report on the relationship between class size and student achievement. After studying several reports on class size, Kerrigan concluded that lower class size can have a positive affect on student achievement.

"These were rumors that were going throughout the building, and they were spreading enough that people were concerned," Deftos said. "We have to take everything very seriously."

Deftos said he spoke with the students whose names had been mentioned and had their lockers searched. Deftos also called police, who sent detectives Robert Wright and Steven Marcolini to investigate.

After interviewing the two students separately and doing an investigation, Wright said there was nothing to indicate that any attack had been planned.

"There's nothing to substantiate the rumors," Wright said, "absolutely nothing."

Deftos said he used the school's closed-circuit television system, which has a monitor in every classroom, to dispel the rumors and allay fears that anyone was in danger. The broadcast was repeated later in the day, he said.

Classes were not disrupted and "everyone went on about their busi-

ness," Deftos said. "We received seven or eight phone calls from parents after school. They seemed to be reassured that we had taken the proper steps."

Yesterday's incident comes on the heels of several other perceived threats, including rumors that a student riot at Scituate High School was being planned based on posters advertising the release of a CD by the industrial music band Atari Teenage Riot that said, "60 Second Wipeout — May 11, 1999."

Deftos said students, staff and parents are on edge after the Columbine High School shootings in Littleton, Colo., in which two students killed 12 classmates and a teacher and wounded two dozen others.

Some students have stopped wearing trenchcoats, Deftos said, because they are worried about how others will react. The two students in Colorado belonged to a small group that called itself the "Trenchcoat Mafia."

"It's tough to stop the rumor mill," Deftos said. "The students have got to be careful what they say and what they do."